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INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 4642
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1885
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY 3626
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 4367
RUEHSV/AMEMBASSY SUVA 0123
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1419
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 2246
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JAKARTA 000105

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NSC FOR E.PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/17/2018

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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM -- PAPUA CHRISTIANS PUSH TO
PROCLAIM "CITY OF THE GOSPEL"

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Classified By: Pol/C Joseph Legend Novak, reasons 1.4 (b+d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Manokwari--in Christian majority West Papua Province--is considering a draft regional bylaw proclaiming itself a "City of the Gospel." Supporters cite the special place of Manokwari in the history of Christian missionary activity in Papua. They also regard the bylaw as a response to Islamic laws already enacted in several parts of Indonesia. Opposition to the proposed law--which would (as now written) restrict non-Christian religious activities--comes from the Muslim community and also from some Christians. Observers are worried that the proposal, if adopted, could spark religious-based tension in Papua and elsewhere. END SUMMARY.

GIMME SOME OF THAT OLD-TIME RELIGION

¶2. (SBU) Residents of Manokwari, the capital of West Papua Province, are debating a controversial proposed ordinance. A group of evangelical Protestant leaders in early 2007 proposed a draft "Gospel City" bylaw based on a recommendation by the Papua People's Council (MRP). The MRP identified three cities as "spiritual centers" of the major religions in Papua: Manokwari for Protestantism; Merauke for Catholicism; and Fakfak for Islam. In February 2007, Papuan scholars, local government officials and religious leaders began drafting the proposed bylaw. A draft was released to the public in April 2007.

¶3. (SBU) The draft law, which proclaims "the Gospel as good news," purports to give "mental and spiritual guidance" to the people of Manokwari. It empowers the local government to regulate religious expression in order to protect Manokwari's status as a "city of the Gospel." Other provisions are also controversial, including Article 26, which allows the government to place Christian religious symbols in public places and offices. Also drawing criticism is Article 30, which essentially would allow the local government to prohibit the construction of non-Christian houses of worship near churches.

14. (C) In a discussion with poloff on the proposed law, Protestant pastor Rev Karel Ereri remarked that it was needed in order to give the government tools to fight "social ills" like gambling, prostitution and drug use. The Manokwari region is also the site where foreign Christian missionaries first arrived in Papua to conduct evangelical work. Today, Protestants remain a majority in the northern part of Papua and many Papuans regard Manokwari as the spiritual center of Protestant Christianity in the Christian-majority province. (Note: Approximately 57% of Papua residents are Protestant, 21% are Catholic and 20% are Muslim. The overwhelming majority of Muslims are migrants from other parts of Indonesia or their descendants.) Given the status of Christianity in the area, supporters assert that that legacy needs the forms of state protection stipulated in the proposed law.

NOT EVERYONE'S IDEA OF THE PROMISED LAND

15. (SBU) Papua's Muslim community has sharply criticized the proposed bylaw. They object most strongly to a provision allowing the local government to restrict where Muslim women can wear Islamic dress. The proposed law's supporters have hinted, however, that they are willing to drop this provision. Muslims also worry that local officials will use the ordinance to block the construction of mosques.

16. (C) Some Christian leaders oppose the law outright. Father Benny Susetyo, director of the Commission for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Catholic Bishop Conference of Indonesia, told poloff that the bill was "against the spirit of Indonesia" and could spell disaster for the country's "interreligious co-existence." Contacts have noted, for example, that radical Muslims could use the existence of the law to argue that Islam must be the official creed of those regions of Indonesia where it dominates (most of the country, in fact).

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17. (SBU) The Jakarta-based Indonesian Communion of Churches, which is the umbrella organization of Papuan Christian Church (GKI), also objected to the proposal for similar reasons and sent officials to Manokwari to argue against it. This last step angered the GKI leadership in Papua, and GKI later withdrew its membership from the Indonesian Communion of Churches.

FAITH VERSUS THE LAW

18. (C) Indonesia is a religiously pluralistic country, and it is not clear whether the proposed law would pass legal and constitutional muster at the national level. (Note: The Indonesian Constitution provides for freedom of religion and Indonesian law recognizes six faiths: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Individuals must identify themselves as belonging to one of the recognized religions on their national ID card.) The Ministry of Home Affairs determines whether local government laws are compatible with the Constitution and the Law on Decentralization. Challenges against local laws can also be made to the Supreme Court. Both bodies have been reluctant to rule on religiously-based laws in other parts of the country, all of which have been based on Islamic law. They might be under more pressure, however, to review Manokwari's Christianity-derived law given the influence of Muslim groups in this Muslim-dominated nation.

NEXT STEPS

19. (C) The Manokwari parliament adjourned in December without approving the proposed law, but plans to resume debating the measure in late January. Supporters of the law hope to enact it by the end of 2008. Jan Christianus Warinussy, a lawyer and expert staff to the Manokwari parliament, told poloff that lawmakers would delete the most

controversial articles of the bylaw. He stressed, however, that supporters would not abandon the campaign for such a law because they believed that "the Gospel leads Papuans from the darkness."

CONCERN AMONG OBSERVERS

¶10. (C) Many Papua observers are wary of the proposed law. Human rights lawyer and Papua Forum chairman Albert Hasibuan told poloff that the proposed law was essentially a reposte to Muslims who had enacted sharia-based laws in some areas of Indonesia. He and other observers worry that, if passed, the law will prompt militant Christians in Papua to push their agenda further, thereby provoking a Muslim backlash. Such a fear is not unwarranted, given past episodes of interreligious violence in Indonesia, and the often tense relations among ethnic and religious groups in Papua.

HUME